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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 LAGOS 001204

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TAGS: PGOV PINS EPET KDEM PHUM EINV ASEC CASC PTER XY NI
SUBJECT: NIGER DELTA: GUNS AND THUGS RULE THE LAND

REF: A. LAGOS 902

- B. ABUJA NI 760
- C. ABUJA NI 913
- D. ABUJA NI 1003
- E. LAGOS 1163
- F. 2003 LAGOS 2434
- G. ABUJA NI 906
- H. ABUJA NI 420

Classified By: Robyn Hinson-Jones for reasons 1.4 (b), (d), and (e)

1. (C) SUMMARY: This is the first in a series of four cables addressing the security, political, and humanitarian situation in the Niger Delta based on a field visit by POLOFF and ECONOFF to Warri June 7 and 8. This cable addresses the overall security situation, Joint Task Force (JTF) Operation Restore Hope's response to the April 23 killings of two AMCITS, the proliferation of small arms, and the consolidation of power and purpose by the militant youths in the area. END SUMMARY.

GETTING THE BALL ROLLING

2. (C) The killings of two AMCIT oil services contract workers along the Benin River (refs A,B,C) have precipitated a course of events in the Niger Delta. JTF Commander BG Elias Zamani (strictly protect) told Consulate Officers that after the killings the JTF arrested over 60 militant youths from both ethnic groups in a dragnet to obtain intelligence (ref A) and warned them that whichever village was responsible for the attack would "pay." Zamani told us he expressed his "disappointment" with the youth leaders for their poor leadership and for creating an atmosphere of chaos and violence. He advised them to cooperate with the JTF and provide information on the killings. Having been held in custody together, the youths were able to discuss the attack, as well as other issues. Ironically, this forced togetherness in the wake of a JTF investigation helped create an atmosphere that laid the foundation for a cease-fire agreement (septel).

IJAW YOUTHS, CONSOLIDATING POWER

3. (S/NF) Sam Ken (strictly protect), a senior militant Ijaw youth leader and one of the key architects of the cease-fire, told Consulate Officers that he has been cooperating with Zamani and the JTF. He explained that the April 23 attack was a planned kidnapping gone awry and carried out by a criminal Ijaw militant youth group, which he said are self-styled "commandos." He explained that the commandos are broken into groups of operation throughout the riverine area, largely along Ijaw clan lines. Commando groups in general are also responsible for bank robberies in Warri and other violent crimes. Commandos located near the Benin River, Ken claims, were responsible for the AMCIT killings and the November 2003 kidnappings for ransom of expatriate employees from the Scottish oil services firm Bredero Shaw (ref F).

4. (S/NF) Motivated by a fear of JTF reprisals for the AMCIT killings and a desire to find a peaceful and political solution to the crisis, Ken told CONOFFS that the Ijaw youth leadership is cleaning house. The youth leadership has targeted the commando groups, specifically its overall leader John Ikpoko. Ken bluntly stated that the Ijaw youth leadership had killed 17 commando leaders and members who had refused to abide by the cease-fire or curb their criminal operations and delivered them to the JTF headquarters. Ikpoko escaped the assassination teams and is in hiding. (Note: "Criminal operations" does not likely refer to facilitating illegal oil bunkering, which Ken was reluctant to discuss in detail. End note.) On June 5, the JTF held a press conference and broadcast pictures of the slain commando leaders on national television, claiming that the "sea pirates" were killed by JTF forces. Zamani, in his conversation with Consulate Officers, claimed that JTF forces

killed the 17 men. (Note: In our conversation with Zamani he was warm and relatively open, willing to discuss even sensitive issues in further detail. However, when asked about the deaths of the 17 "commandos", his demeanor changed and he became very closed-lipped. His change in behavior may lend credence to Ken's version of events. End note.)

THE ORIGINS OF GUNS

15. (S/NF) Illegal oil bunkering runs rampant in the region. Mission reporting has linked shady oil deals to First Lady Stella Obasanjo (Ref G). Ijaw and Itsekiri youths and elders accuse unnamed high-ranking politicians in Abuja, while unconfirmed reports claim that Lebanese nationals possibly funding the terrorist groups Hamas and Hizbollah, the Russian Mafia, and drug cartels are involved (Refs B and H). Militant youths have been used to protect and facilitate the bunkering of crude oil and, to do so, have acquired small arms, namely AK-47s. Ken told Consulate Officers that most of the youth's weaponry and ammunition comes from the Nigerian Army, who sells them in large quantities packaged in crates. Other arms originate from conflict areas in West Africa and some are locally made in Warri. However, Ken also implicated Lebanon and North Korea as sources of arms. (Comment: In his discussions, Ken was very frank about the African origins of arms, including the Nigerian Army. He showed signs of nervousness when implicating the Lebanese and was very nervous, agitated, and possibly deceitful when implicating the North Koreans. When pressed to clarify further, Ken initially referred to the North Koreans as "small white people," then "Asians," then "Koreans," then "North Koreans." End Comment.)

JTF Operations

16. (S/NF) Although the JTF's ability to exercise its power in the riverine areas around Warri is limited, its actions have improved security along the Benin River. Zamani confirmed he has set up a forward deployment base at the mouth of the Benin River near the village of Oghey Dunigun (ref A). He has also set up a deployment area in another village further down the Benin River and is slowly ratcheting up his presence there. JTF forces already secure Chevron Nigeria Limited (CNL) flow stations and facilities along the river, but they are trying to provide longer-term security in the area to ensure the safety of CNL operations and enable over 10,000 Itsekiri internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return (septel). A handful of Itsekiri youth returned to their villages in April, hoping that others will follow, but Zamani has told the Itsekiri to wait until he has finalized his deployments before they begin returning home in large numbers.

17. (S/NF) Zamani has also declared war on the commando groups. Ken told Consulate Officers that with Ijaw youth leadership cooperation, Zamani raided Ogbe-Ijoh (located across the Warri River from Warri) and surrounding Ijaw villages. These villages served as one of the major operating areas from which criminal raids upon the city of Warri and surrounding Itsekiri villages originated. Several sources say that they are now abandoned and the people are homeless, likely doubling the previous known figure of Ijaw IDPs to 2,000.

18. (S/NF) As if ethnic conflict in Warri was not enough to occupy the JTF, Zamani told Consulate Officers he has recently deployed some of his troops to areas around Port Harcourt, where there has been widespread gangland warfare within the past two months (refs D and E). Zamani said that part of his mandate was to protect oil installations throughout the larger Niger Delta area and that his forces were now protecting facilities there. He declined to state how many have been sent. Recent press reports claim that military forces had clashed with the gangs, leaving 50 dead near Buguma. Zamani said he was unaware of such reports, emphasizing his mandate to protect oil facilities only and pointed out that two brigades outside of the JTF were stationed in Port Harcourt.

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